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They 'Come for a Lark'

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Introduction

On Sunday 16 October 1853 Martin Ware III, the superintendent of Compton Place Ragged School's Sunday evening boys' class, sought God's blessing to 'accompany my labours' in his journal.¹ The ensuing entry, occupying just one side of a page, communicates the rewards and challenges ragged school teachers faced. After invoking divine favour on the school, Ware detailed a recent visit from Alexander Patterson, a former scholar now in the navy. Ware noted that Patterson 'brought me an American Aloe', which he had purchased in the West Indies. Beneath this Ware recorded the recent sentencing of 'H. Evans' and 'J. Armstrong' to 2 yrs imprisonment for stealing a ~~Horse~~ Donkey & cart!', pointedly adding 'They are each 9 yrs old'. At the foot of the page the entry closed with the news that young Ward, whose hardship Ware had cited before, had been discovered stealing. Ware's intense disappointment is evident in his words, suggested in his bracketed '(alas, alas!)' and his closing, lament-laden sentence: 'he is a boy in whom I had the fullest reliance'.²

Hosted in haphazard classrooms – in barns, abandoned factories, and beneath railway arches – ragged children learned to read and write in spite of their poverty. Of most importance, however, was the communication of the gospel. God's love and saving work through Jesus Christ was at the core of a ragged school education. After the existing London ragged schools united under the London Ragged School Union (LRSU) banner in April 1844, they multiplied exponentially in the metropolis. By 1865 there were 613 schools in the capital alone. Moreover, although the LRSU played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge through its literature and

¹ Compton Place Ragged School was located in the borough of Camden, North London. In 1855 the school moved to Brunswick Buildings, a five-minute walk from Compton Place. For simplicity, the institution is referred to as 'Compton Place' throughout this article.

² Surrey History Centre (SHC) 1585/1-7, 3, 16 October 1853, Martin Ware III's School Journals. Entries from Ware's journals are quoted verbatim.

public presence, ragged schools were not confined to London. Cities and large towns across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales adopted the ragged school model, and unions similar to the LRSU were established in Liverpool and Manchester. The movement benefited from Lord Shaftesbury's 'child-championing prestige' and charismatic leadership following his appointment as LRSU president in November 1844, a title he held until his death over forty years later.³

Ragged schools were a crucial component of Britain's educational scene in the mid-nineteenth century, serving society's poorest children who were precluded from learning elsewhere. Dame schools, or, as Phil Gardner categorises them, 'working-class private schools', provided an often progressive education in exchange for a small fee.⁴ Such institutions, however, exceeded the modest means of the impoverished households for which ragged schools intended to cater. Although Sunday schools were free, they encouraged children to dress in their 'Sunday best' and often had little toleration for disruptive behaviour. In his study of working-class autobiographies, John Burnett writes that destitute children were effectively excluded by their 'lack of suitable clothes, shoes or the "collection" penny'.⁵ Even where Sunday schools did accommodate the most unkempt children, the discrepancy between their appearance and that of their classmates may well have dissuaded them from returning. The LRSU was keen to differentiate itself from the Sunday School Union (SSU) from the outset, making it clear that ragged schools were wholly separate from those institutions inspired by John Raikes and Hannah Ball. Accordingly, those present at a meeting of the LRSU in 1846 heard that ragged schools were for those 'whose abject wretchedness, or whose depraved character, precludes them from participating in the advantages of the Sunday schools'.⁶

³ Charles Montague, *Sixty Years in Waifdom, or, The Ragged School Movement in English History* (London: Woburn Books, 1904), 164.

⁴ Phil Gardener, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

⁵ John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1984), 143.

⁶ 'The Ragged Schools', *Daily News*, 21 February 1846.

The ragged school remit was a broad one. The majority of schools taught both boys and girls, separating the sexes during instruction. A wide range of ages were welcome within the institutions; in June 1846 one London school, ‘a sample for all of the rest’, taught those aged between five and seventeen years.⁷ As classes took place according to the schedules of labouring children and volunteer teachers, evening and weekend classes were common. With growing numbers of scholars and teachers, the services offered by the schools increased also. Ragged churches, mother’s meetings, nurseries, penny banks, lending-libraries, and soup kitchens are a modest sample of the ventures that could stem from a single institution.⁸ However, with the Education Acts of 1870, 1880, and 1891, the LRSU was dealt a series of irreparable blows in the. These Acts successively established Board Schools in regions deemed inadequately served, enforced attendance for children aged between five and ten years, and instigated state provision for school fees up to ten shillings. Together these changes effectively eliminated the need for institutions specifically for poor children, and in consequence the number of ragged schools sharply declined. While the schools had counted 50,312 scholars in 1865, just a decade later this number had become depleted to ‘only about 7,000’.⁹ The majority of ragged schools had made one of two choices by the close of the nineteenth century; either converting into Board Schools or disbanding altogether.

This article explores the guidance given to ragged school teachers by the LRSU in the light of the myriad of challenges cited in newspaper reports, promotional material, and unpublished material relating to local schools. Of particular value, is the LRSU’s magazine, the *Ragged School Union Magazine* (RSUM), which featured a regular ‘Teachers’ Column’ offering advice and pedagogical guidance. ‘On the ground’ material offers access to the frustrations teachers experienced by

⁷ ‘The Ragged School Union’, *The Times*, 10 June 1846, 8.

⁸ Kathleen Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of Their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 79-82.

⁹ ‘The Twenty-First Anniversary of the Ragged School Union’, RSUM (June 1865), 127, ‘Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Meeting of the Ragged School Union’, RSUM (June 1875), 133.

teachers.¹⁰ In detailing his encounters at Compton Place, Ware's journal provides a unique account of both the ragged school teacher's role and his reception among scholars. Although access to the experiences of girls is limited by Ware's sole involvement with the boys' class, his journals nevertheless open up new understanding as to the ways in which faith shaped and inspired Victorian philanthropy. Because of the voluntary nature of these institutions, it was critical to their success that scholars not only attended, but returned. To this end, lessons sought to engage and excite scholars while long addresses were condemned. By using ragged school teaching advice in conjunction with sources from local schools, this article explores the complex territory of the ragged school classroom. This approach enables our understanding to move beyond presumptions of the teacher's control and the scholar's obedience, shifting the focus towards the child's perception of – and participation in – the movement. More broadly, the interdenominational appeal of the schools grants important insights into the effectiveness of pan-evangelical initiatives in the mid-nineteenth century. Through focusing on the ragged schools, this article enhances understanding as to how the urban poor received and responded to evangelical teaching and middle-class philanthropic efforts. It enables us to rethink and reframe the relationships forged between evangelically-motivated philanthropists and the children and families they worked with.

The ragged schools have received little concentrated attention from historians; however, the movement is regularly touched on within scholarship from an array of disciplines. Historians interested in nineteenth-century child poverty, such as Hugh Cunningham and Anna Davin, reference the schools in their studies of the portrayal and experiences of destitute children.¹¹ Although the movement is often cited in histories of education or evangelicalism, it rarely receives more than a cursory mention. W. B. Stephens's *Education in Britain* mentions the schools

¹⁰ The *RSUM* varies between 'Teachers' Column' and 'Teacher's Column'.

¹¹ Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London: River Oram Press, 1996).

in its opening chapter, noting that the ‘1830s saw the beginnings of “ragged” or “industrial” schools, philanthropic endeavours aimed at saving vagrant and homeless children’.¹² Likewise, Michael Sanderson states simply that ragged schools ‘took the poorest, vagabond children for a basic education’.¹³ Stewart J. Brown discusses the schools in relation to Shaftesbury’s social action, as do Shaftesbury’s biographers.¹⁴ Kathleen Heasman’s *Evangelicals in Action* provides the most thorough account of the schools from an ecclesiastical perspective, dedicating a chapter to the movement and its achievements.¹⁵ Given the large number of children who passed through the schools in London alone – the LRSU estimated upwards of 300,000 by May 1870 – the dearth of scholarship on the movement requires correction.¹⁶

The way in which poor children responded to religious teaching also remains under-researched. In her chapter on the moral instruction provided in late nineteenth-century English elementary schools, Susannah Wright examines the role that beliefs about poverty played in shaping moralistic teaching, concluding that existing evidence ‘gives little agency or voice to the pupils themselves’ and cannot ‘tell us what children thought’.¹⁷ In relation to Sunday Schools, Laqueur argues that the religious teaching equipped children to face the very real challenges of bereavement and illness. Although Laqueur discusses conversions and revivals, his findings are limited by his focus on promotional material that does not provide access to children’s ‘in the moment’ responses to the Christian message.¹⁸ In terms of how such teaching was imparted,

¹² W. B. Stephens, *Education in Britain 1750-1914* (London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1998), 10.

¹³ Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 24.

¹⁴ Stewart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 1815-1914* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008), 163, Georgina Battiscombe, *Shaftesbury: A Biography of the Seventh Earl 1801-1885* (London: Constable, 1974), Geoffrey Best, *Shaftesbury* (London: Batsford, 1964), Geoffrey B. A. M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, 1801-1885* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *Lord Shaftesbury* (London: Constable, 1923), J. Wesley Bready, *Lord Shaftesbury and Social-Industrial Progress* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926).

¹⁵ Heasman, 69-87.

¹⁶ ‘Proceedings at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Ragged School Union’, *RSUM* (June 1870).

¹⁷ Susannah Wright, ‘Moral Instruction, Urban Poverty and English Elementary Schools in the Late Nineteenth Century’, in *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency 1750-1914*, ed. by Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 277-295, at 294.

¹⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture, 1780-1850* (London: Yale University Press, 1976), 160-169.

Burnett observes that it ‘was not, of course, supposed or intended that children should enjoy their schooling’.¹⁹ This assertion may be applicable to many Victorian institutions; however, it cannot reflect the ragged schools.

Recent studies of nineteenth century child-saving movements, of which the ragged schools formed a part, are dominated by narratives that cast the institutions as instruments of social control. According to such interpretations, predominantly middle-class teachers imposed their beliefs upon the children of the poor. According to Linda Mahood and Barbara Littlewood, working-class children were subjected to the zealous and misguided fervour of evangelicals intent upon ‘saving’ their bodies and souls.²⁰ In their expansive study of evangelical child migration discourse, Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel stress the invasive nature of such movements.²¹ While providing valuable insights into the construction of child-saving discourse, Swain and Hillel do not assess how children reacted to – or interacted with – these organisations. Such scholarship focuses on the actions or attitudes of adults whose effects on children tend to be presumed, thus composing a picture of adult as agent and child as subject. Goose and Honeyman’s recent edited collection on child labour is of particular relevance here. Of especial value is their claim that:

Although children have hitherto been silent, and historians frequently refer to the need to ‘strain’ to hear their voices, in fact they can be clearly heard – both literally in protest, strikes, demonstrations and placards, and more figuratively in terms of direct action, including absconding, and breaking windows and machinery.²²

Absence, interruptions, mockery, vandalism, and actual or threatened violence, may equally be interpreted as a means of protest in the ragged school classroom. It is less easy, however, to discern the motives or intentions underlying such behaviour.

¹⁹ Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*. 169.

²⁰ Linda Mahood and Barbara Littlewood, ‘The “Vicious” Girl and the “Street-Corner” Boy: Sexuality and the Gendered Delinquent in the Scottish Child-Saving Movement 1850-1940’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 4:4 (1994), 549-578.

²¹ Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). Swain and Hillel’s study considers the RSUM alongside material from the Church of England’s Waifs and Strays and Barnardo’s Homes.

²² Goose and Honeyman, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 8.

When promotional literature is analysed in isolation, the conversation between teachers and children is silenced. This approach fosters a vacuum in which words and emotions are attributed to ragged school scholars, either as a positive and thankful chorus or a terrorised and tearful one. At the same time, such narratives often denigrate or belittle volunteer teachers, transforming them into, at best, misguided do-gooders or, at worst, domineering bullies. By bringing together promotional material with local documents, this article situates ragged school teaching advice within the context of the challenges teachers faced in practice.

Christianity and the Classroom

Determined to avoid the sectarian divisions that had plagued Sunday Schools, ragged schools were emphatically interdenominational.²³ For the LRSU ‘oneness in Christ’ was of greater value than ‘oneness in church discipline’.²⁴ Although, to use Thomas Guthrie’s words, the movement was founded ‘upon a broad basis’, it was nevertheless distinctly evangelical.²⁵ The schools were ‘earnest, devoted, Evangelical, but not sectarian’.²⁶ According to the LRSU, those involved with the movement were ‘members of a great evangelical alliance’ who were ‘working together in the schoolroom’.²⁷ Reflecting this principle, the schools were named after localities or streets rather than churches or individuals. In the hope of avoiding controversy, creeds were banished and the Bible was the central religious text permitted in the classroom. As such, the ‘Rules for the government’ of Field Lane included ‘VII. No Teacher shall be allowed to introduce any Catechism’ and ‘VIII. That the Bible shall be the principle Class Book’.²⁸ As far as possible, Christian teaching was to consist of simple, Biblical truths.

²³ Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 65-74.

²⁴ ‘Our Principles: A Review’, *RSUM* (January 1869), 2.

²⁵ ‘Ragged Schools – Preliminary Meeting’, *Scotsman*, 24 March 1847.

²⁶ ‘Edinburgh City Mission’, *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 January 1849.

²⁷ ‘Our Principles: A Review’, *RSUM* (January 1869), 2.

²⁸ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) 4060/A/01/001, 12 September 1843.

The ragged school mission and method therefore aligned with the four tenets of evangelicalism that David Bebbington has identified: activism, biblicism, conversionism, and crucicentrism.²⁹ The Biblical message of Christ's salvation, the importance of conversion, and the Christian's duty to 'go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in' were at the heart of ragged school philosophy.³⁰ These identifying characteristics of evangelicalism can be seen in the LRSU's 1850 proclamation that:

it was not merely with pens and primers they went down into the dark purlieus of misery and guilt, as if these could strike light into benighted minds [...] but they carried with them the Gospel – that only charter of human freedom – that only lever capable of elevating the morally depraved.³¹

Eight years later the *RSUM* encouraged those pioneering the recently established Liverpool schools to enter the city's 'dark recesses with the light of Evangelical Truth in their hand'.³² It was only through the power of the Gospel – and there 'was no instrument possessing so much power' – that impoverished and neglected children could be saved.³³

The movement's supporters deemed it part of a broader spiritual awakening, wherein God's people were no longer 'delegating their duties to priests, ministers, or missionaries, but themselves going'.³⁴ The role of the ragged school teacher was regarded as a calling, as encapsulated in the 1849 poem 'Unto This Work We Are Called'.³⁵ Local prayer meetings invited God's spirit into the classroom; the Field Lane Ragged School committee prayed for a 'pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon both Teachers & Taught'.³⁶ The *RSUM* featured reports of a 'spiritual awakening' among scholars and encouraged teachers to seek 'more abundant

²⁹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

³⁰ Luke 14:23 encompasses the ragged school message; it was quoted at the head of each LRSU Annual Report.

³¹ *Crime and its Causes*, 3. The public meeting on which this pamphlet reports was in response to Henry Mayhew's accusations in the *Morning Chronicle* that 'institutions like the Ragged Schools, which seek to reform our juvenile offenders merely by instructing them, cannot be attended with the desired results'. 'Labour and the Poor, Letter XLIV', *Morning Chronicle*, 25 March 1850, 5.

³² 'Papers, Original and Selected: The Liverpool Ragged School Union', *RSUM* (March 1854), 64.

³³ 'Intelligence: St. Giles' Ragged School', *RSUM* (January, 1849), 18.

³⁴ 'Spiritual Life and Ragged Schools', *RSUM* (November 1859), 217.

³⁵ 'Poetry: Unto This Work We Are Called', *RSUM* (May 1849), 92.

³⁶ LMA 4060/A/01/006, 18 January 1860.

manifestation of Divine influence'.³⁷ Those teachers present at a meeting in St. Giles's Refuge in November 1859 were roused by a spiritual call to arms: 'Let us then not rest till this Revival is experienced by ourselves; we shall then teach with a power that can be felt'.³⁸ Reflecting this evangelical fervour, not to mention the movement's financial constraints, the *RSUM* boasted of an army of volunteers. By 1856, the LRSU's twelfth year, voluntary teachers numbered 2118 in contrast with just 332 who were paid.³⁹ Two years later volunteers were commended as having been 'and are, and ever must be, the strength of the movement'.⁴⁰ It was not training that qualified individuals to teach; rather, teachers were to possess 'zeal, patience, and persevering energy'.⁴¹ According to Shaftesbury, 'it was not necessary that [teachers] should pass an ordeal of examination [...] it was a knowledge of the Bible they ought to possess, and also an acquaintance with the human heart'.⁴² Because of this reliance upon largely untrained volunteers, however, many adults working in the schools had little to no experience of teaching children.

The ragged school movement was one aspect of a larger evangelical picture. Although Heasman highlights the prominence of Evangelical Anglicans within the LRSU, arguing that it 'was essentially an Evangelical organisation, its chairman being Lord Shaftesbury', it is plain that teachers were drawn from a variety of church backgrounds.⁴³ The London City Mission, which Donald Lewis cites as 'the largest and possibly most enduring interdenominational mission in Britain', worked closely with LRSU.⁴⁴ Drawn from across the evangelical spectrum, London City Missionaries frequently offered their services to ragged schools, participating in prayer meetings,

³⁷ 'Spiritual Life and Ragged Schools', *RSUM* (March 1860), 62, 'Spiritual Life and Ragged Schools', *RSUM* (July 1858), 123.

³⁸ 'Spiritual Life and Ragged Schools', *RSUM* (January 1860), 17.

³⁹ 'Meeting of Paid Teachers', *RSUM* (January 1856), 10.

⁴⁰ 'Paid Teachers and their Annual Meeting', *RSUM* (May 1858), 92.

⁴¹ George Hall, *Sought and Saved: A Prize Essay on the Ragged Schools and Kindred Institutions* (London: Partridge and Oakley, 1855), 14.

⁴² 'The Earl of Shaftesbury on Ragged Schools', *The Times*, 22 October 1859, 8.

⁴³ Heasman, 72.

⁴⁴ Donald Lewis, *Lighten their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-Class London* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 49.

speaking at assemblies, and volunteering as teachers.⁴⁵ The scale of City Missionaries involved with the movement is hinted at within a list of 1,704 London teachers that Alexander Anderson, a leading member of the LRSU, presented to Shaftesbury in 1867. Amongst the names are 23 London City Missionaries. Although this figure may seem insignificant, it should be noted that 35 per cent – or 605 – of those named did not detail any occupation. Alongside a diverse amalgamation of trades, including ‘cheesemonger’, ‘cow-keeper’, ‘fancy box-maker’, ‘pickle-filler’, and ‘surgeon’, the title ‘London City Missionary’ recurs in various forms, including ‘Frederick Cox, City missionary’, ‘Thos. Hazeldine, city missionary’, and ‘Thomas Salter, L. C. Missionary’.⁴⁶ The presence of City Missionaries within this list demonstrates the movement’s scope and reaffirms Anderson’s claim that ‘We belong to different evangelical denominations of Christians’, which Shaftesbury labelled ‘the safety and the purity of the system’.⁴⁷

In undertaking his voluntary role at Compton Place alongside his primary occupation as a barrister, Ware was representative of those ragged school teachers who spent their evenings and weekends labouring in ‘Christ’s vineyard’.⁴⁸ Like Shaftesbury himself, Ware identified as an Evangelical. Having been educated in a Baptist school, Ware converted to Anglicanism as a young man.⁴⁹ Ware’s detailed school journals witness to the time their author invested in the institution and its scholars. In his later years he reflected in his memoirs that his active role at Compton Place had limited his professional achievements. It had, he wrote, ‘interfered in some degree with my getting business’.⁵⁰ Ware volunteered at the school for approximately twenty-two years, seventeen of which are detailed in his journals (1850-1867).⁵¹ Alongside the Sunday evening boys’ class, of which he was superintendent from 1848 until approximately 1854, his

⁴⁵ For more information on the connection between Scripture Readers, London City Missionaries, and the LRSU see Lewis, 166, Heasman, 71.

⁴⁶ ‘Presentation to the Earl of Shaftesbury’, *RSUM* (August 1859), 162-175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 163, 166.

⁴⁸ ‘Testimonials to Teachers and Scholars’, *RSUM* (March 1860), 59.

⁴⁹ SHC 1487/106/1-4, 1, Memoirs of Martin Ware III.

⁵⁰ SHC 1487/106/1.

⁵¹ This figure is given in a hand-written note from John Kirk, the Secretary of the LRSU at the time of Ware’s death in December 1895, enclosed in journal seven, SHC 1585/7.

weekly schedule featured home-visits, committee meetings, and prayer gatherings. Ware was also a part of the broader ragged school network, attending meetings or worship services for teachers in the Camden area. In addition to his involvement with the LRSU, Ware was actively involved with a number of other missionary societies, including the British and Foreign Bible Society, the China Inland Mission, and the Church Missionary Society. The numerous obituaries that followed Ware's death at the close of 1895 – in publications such as the *Globe*, the *Guardian*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Record*, and *The Times* – testify in equal parts to his faith and to his prominence within philanthropic circles. He was, according to the Church of England's *Record*, an 'old and tried Evangelical' whose 'kindly presence will be missed at many council tables'.⁵² Similarly, the *Globe* noted that Ware had been 'amongst the most active of London laymen'.⁵³ The *Yorkshire Evening Post* and the *Leeds Mercury* affirmed simply: 'the Evangelical party has lost a prominent layman in the person Mr. Martin Ware'.⁵⁴

They 'Come for a Lark'

Ragged school reports frequently described the crowds of excited children awaiting entry to their classroom. Henry Mayhew, the *Morning Chronicle* journalist, expanded on this, telling how the children made much 'noise and ribaldry', causing grief to those neighbouring the institutions.⁵⁵ As a site where children congregated with peers it is unsurprising that ragged schools were associated with play, or 'having a lark'. The difficult behaviour of ragged school children was, in Cunningham's words, 'a matter of notoriety'.⁵⁶ The notion of a ragged school was reportedly regarded with derision by many of the children. One commentator told how one group of ragged

⁵² Obituary printed in the *Record*, pasted in journal seven, SHC 1585/7. While local newspapers presented versions of the same syndicated obituary, those published in major newspapers and evangelical journals were composed by different individuals and thus had different emphases.

⁵³ Obituary printed in the *Globe*, pasted in journal seven, SHC 1585/7.

⁵⁴ 'Local Sport', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 6 January 1896, 4, 'Births, Deaths, Marriages and Obituaries', *Leeds Mercury*, 7 January 1896, 8.

⁵⁵ 'Labour and the Poor, Letter XVIII', *Morning Chronicle*, 19 March 1850, 5.

⁵⁶ Cunningham, *Children of the Poor*, 108.

scholars were ‘all in a state of frantic fun at the idea of any one schooling them’.⁵⁷ In 1850 the *Daily News* reported of Field Lane’s earliest students that those ‘who did attend came only for fun’.⁵⁸ Similarly, Ware often remarked on the insubordinate behaviour of his boys’ class, describing it as ‘difficult’, ‘noisy’, and ‘unruly’. On both 8 and 15 December 1850 he labelled the boys’ behaviour as ‘turbulent’.⁵⁹ In the confines of his journal, Ware noted his belief that some came ‘only come for a lark’ and expressed his frustration that one boy ‘looks upon every thing as a lark – He seems to think it a lark to disturb the school’.⁶⁰

As Ware’s journal entries suggest, teachers were frequently interrupted by their scholars. In Ward’s Place Ragged School one boy shouted ‘clean your boots’ whenever he felt the class was too quiet, while a companion ‘perhaps thinking a variation in the performance desirable, would chime in with “ten a penny walnuts”’.⁶¹ On other occasions, scholars mocked their teachers. When a Field Lane teacher told his class that ‘the Lord is looking upon you; he is there above you’ one boy ‘put on a most ludicrous expression of incredulity, and standing up, proceeded to scrutinise the ceiling with a mock-critical air’, after which he announced ‘Blest if I see him’. According to the teacher, the boy’s remark gave ‘inexpressible delight’ to his peers.⁶² The singing of street-songs was an especially effective means of disrupting classes, allowing scholars to join in unison, singing lyrics unknown, and possibly offensive, to their teacher. By substituting the words of hymns with those of their own invention, the scholars of Lambeth Ragged School cast their teacher as an outsider within their classroom while simultaneously poking fun at the school’s Christian message. These anecdotes demonstrate the scholars’ quick wit, as well as the freedom with which they spoke (or sang) in the classroom.

⁵⁷ Untitled Article, *Derby Mercury*, 24 January 1849, 2, ‘Notes on Popular Movements, *Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal*, 9 December 1848, 4.

⁵⁸ ‘Visits to the London Ragged Schools’, *Daily News*, 12 April 1850.

⁵⁹ SHC 1585/1, 8 December 1850, 15 December 1850.

⁶⁰ SHC 1585/2, 16 November 1851.

⁶¹ ‘Ward’s Place, Lower Road Islington’, *RSUM* (January 1859), 10.

⁶² ‘Visits to the London Ragged Schools’, *Daily News*, 12 April 1850.

It was not only the children's voices that interrupted teaching, however; some sought more physical means of disruption. Stones, mud, and vegetables were smuggled into classrooms to be thrown at their teachers or peers, while those denied entry launched makeshift missiles through the classroom windows. A letter signed 'S. R. S.', published in the *RSUM* in 1849, claimed that Field Lane teachers wore hats 'for protection' from the 'rotten vegetables and animal refuse' that were often thrown at them.⁶³ In January 1847 the *Daily News* told how 'books, slates, mud, and stones [were] flung at the teacher's head'.⁶⁴ In the same month the *Observer* quoted a Bristol teacher who had been 'pelted' with mud in the streets by the school's 'most unmanageable' boy.⁶⁵ Other supposed scholars went further still. One child set a book on fire to show his feelings towards learning, while another utilised a heavy volume as a club-like weapon.⁶⁶ The *British Mothers' Magazine* recounted that children brought gunpowder into schools, randomly lighting it and filling classrooms with smoke.⁶⁷ Fireworks appear to have been a popular means of wreaking havoc. Field Lane teachers described the 'delight of the pupils' when the superintendent attempted to 'quell an insurrection amidst the banging of crackers'.⁶⁸ Ware reported similar events, noting in November 1853 that the boys nearly 'set the place on fire with a Catherine wheel' and 'scared Mrs Ward out her wits'.⁶⁹ Three years later Ware related how lessons were dramatically interrupted upon the discovery of a fire in the wash house. When the charred remnants of a firecracker were found, it was concluded to have been the cause. Such behaviour was undoubtedly entertaining to those involved. More than this, it was an assertion of the scholar's ability to direct the dynamics within the classroom. The throwing of objects, singing, and impromptu interruptions all undermined the teacher's authority.

⁶³ 'Correspondence', *RSUM* (March 1849), 55.

⁶⁴ 'Advertisements & Notices', *Daily News*, 11 January 1847.

⁶⁵ 'Bristol Ragged School', *Observer*, 25 January 1847, 3.

⁶⁶ 'Visits to the London Ragged Schools', *Daily News*, 12 April 1850, SHC 1585/7, Anonymous Letter, 18 June 1848.

⁶⁷ 'Ragged Schools of London', *British Mother's Magazine*, 1 February 1849, 48,

⁶⁸ 'Visits to the London Ragged Schools', *Daily News*, 12 April 1850.

⁶⁹ SHC 1585/3, 6 November 1853.

In literature intended for volunteers, as well as in that for the general public, ragged school teachers were regularly depicted as being at the children's mercy. Such accounts suggested that it was the children, not the teachers, who controlled the classroom. Upon first consideration such a portrayal may seem counterproductive when seeking the public's financial support. Yet, this narrative powerfully conveyed the teacher's heroism and the crucial role played by the ragged school movement in taming semi-delinquent children. Aspiring teachers were instructed that, because of their wild nature, street-children 'could not be coerced, but must be persuaded'.⁷⁰ Teachers were reliant upon the children's cooperation. As such, reports of scholars refusing to follow instructions were numerous. Shaftesbury himself related an especially comic instance of mutinous children. He told how his good friend and the LRSU's Secretary, Joseph Payne, entered a classroom to discover six scholars sitting on their long-suffering superintendent's back while singing 'Pop Goes the Weasel'.⁷¹ Thomas Guthrie recalled the events when an inexperienced teacher in Edinburgh 'unfortunately closed his eyes' in prayer:

For a moment his reverent attitude, and the voice of prayer, seemed, like the voice of Jesus on the stormy waters, to produce a great calm. But by-and-by I heard a curious noise, and I shall not forget the sight which met my eyes on suddenly opening them; there – and behind them a crowd of grinning faces, red with efforts to suppress their laughter – stood two ragged urchins, each holding a flaming candle under my friend's nose, and I could not help thinking that there was a wicked cleverness in this.⁷²

It is more than possible that similar incidents occurred elsewhere, as in later years the *RSUM* instructed teachers to keep '*their* eyes fixed on the scholars' during prayer.⁷³

In 1848 Shaftesbury affirmed the teacher's vulnerability in the classroom, asserting that the role was 'absolutely a service of danger'.⁷⁴ The *British Mother's Magazine* applied comparable terminology the following year, when it suggested that the opening of a school 'was often a

⁷⁰ 'Westminster Ragged School', *The Times*, 24 April 1850, 5.

⁷¹ Claire Seymour, *Ragged Schools, Ragged Children* (London: Ragged School Museum Trust, 1995), 22.

⁷² Thomas Guthrie, *Out of Harness* (New York: Strahan & Co., 1867), 7-8.

⁷³ 'Teachers' Column: Rules for a Sunday Night School', *RSUM* (November 1870), 255.

⁷⁴ 'Ragged School Emigration', *Examiner*, 10 June 1848.

curious scene' that was 'not free from danger'.⁷⁵ This language sensationalised and elevated the teacher's role, likening teachers to overseas missionaries. Although sparsely reported, there were numerous incidents of violence against teachers. The Bristol teacher who described the school's 'most unmanageable' scholar also told how the same child 'has kicked my legs', though adding '(happily he has no shoes)'.⁷⁶ When an array of 'juvenile "roughs"' congregated outside Harrow Street Ragged School and 'threatened to stone the master' they were, unsurprisingly, refused admission.⁷⁷ Two especially serious cases occurred at Field Lane and were detailed in the *Daily News*. In the first instance a boy 'got a knife and attempted to stab the superintendent', while in the second a boy 'brought a large knife' with the intention, 'as he said, of sticking his teacher with it'.⁷⁸ The *RSUM* also reported an incident from Field Lane, in which a group of boys planned to attend the school for 'a lark'; however, if any teacher intervened they would 'rip him up'. In this instance, the boys' desire to have 'a lark' appears decidedly darker than those cases cited above. Since it was one of these boys who had previously attempted to 'stab the superintendent', the threat was deemed serious.⁷⁹ In January 1863 the *RSUM* published a letter signed 'A Worker' entitled 'How to Treat the Roughs', which told readers that 'within the last few days our Master has been assaulted' and the anonymous school in question had decided to press charges. The letter urged other institutions to prosecute violent children, suggesting that although 'this may appear very harsh [...] Some protection is required'.⁸⁰ However, such incidents were not common; one teacher was sufficiently confident in his scholars to suggest that they provide a knife-cleaning service to their communities.⁸¹

⁷⁵ 'Ragged Schools of London', *British Mother's Magazine*, 1 February 1849, 48.

⁷⁶ 'Bristol Ragged School', *Observer*, 25 January 1847, 3.

⁷⁷ 'School Agent's Work – West and South', *RSUM* (July 1869), 156.

⁷⁸ 'Visits to the London Ragged Schools', *Daily News*, 12 April 1850.

⁷⁹ 'Correspondence', *RSUM* (March 1849), 55. It is possible that the boy who attempted to 'stab the superintendent' is the same boy mentioned in the *Daily News*, although this cannot be verified.

⁸⁰ 'Correspondence: How to Treat the Roughs', *RSUM* (January 1863), 20.

⁸¹ 'Correspondence: Knife-Cleaning Brigade', *RSUM* (August 1865), 194.

From Ware's journals it appears that one teacher, Mr Berrington, was regularly ridiculed by his class. Berrington complained to Ware of the tardiness and bad behaviour of his scholars, and, although Ware did not elaborate, such problems would seem to have been more common under Berrington's supervision than his own. Ware recorded that one boy's father 'seemed to think Berrington a goose and complained of his bad management', again suggesting that Berrington had little control over the class.⁸² On 6 January 1861 Ware recorded Berrington's 'trouble with Tom Ramsay', adding that he and another boy had 'knocked Mr Berrington's hat about'. The two boys had initially refused to apologise, only doing so immediately prior to the class treat.⁸³ Two years later Berrington summoned another boy to court charged with assaulting him.⁸⁴ In contrast, in his seventeen years at the school Ware never recorded any incidents of violence towards himself. The challenge Berrington faced when controlling the boys was further exemplified in May 1863 when Ware learned that he 'had beaten two of the boys very severely'.⁸⁵ Violence, then, was not only meted out by the children to their teachers. After learning of Berrington's actions, Ware visited one of the boys' mothers and 'pacified her'.⁸⁶

Historians including Gardner and Laqueur have recently contradicted traditional assumptions regarding the use of corporal punishment in nineteenth-century schools, arguing that it was often discouraged and deemed ineffective in the context of charity or voluntary schools.⁸⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that corporal punishment was condemned by advocates of the ragged schools. Just as aggression in children was indicative of immoral influences, such behaviour in teachers was troubling. The *RSUM* made it clear that teachers should refrain from violence, advising that '*the teacher be deemed incompetent who cannot govern his school without the frequent use of the*

⁸² SHC 1585/7, 27 November 1864.

⁸³ SHC 1585/6, 6 January 1861.

⁸⁴ SHC 1585/6, 23 August 1863.

⁸⁵ SHC 1585/6, 22 May 1863.

⁸⁶ SHC 1585/6, 22 May 1863.

⁸⁷ Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 17-18, Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools*.

rod.⁸⁸ As early as 1847 Shaftesbury stressed that ragged schools ‘cannot operate by intimidation’.⁸⁹ George Hall, whose 1855 book on the schools was commended ‘unanimously’ by an LRSU committee including Ware, warned ‘Those who only know how to scold and drive [...] had better not enter our Ragged Schools’.⁹⁰ The *RSUM*’s ‘Teachers’ Column’ told readers “‘Love begets love” and “Anger and hate beget anger and hate””.⁹¹ Such arguments attributed behaviour, for better or worse, to teachers. Drawing upon the educational theory of *tabula rasa*, it was argued that children reflected the environment to which they were exposed. For this reason, teachers were to foster a sense of love in the classroom, rather than fear.

‘The Happiest Portions of the Day’

The notion that children came to school freely, rather than in response to compulsion, was at the centre of the ragged school model.⁹² Probably because of this, infrequent and sporadic attendance was a common problem. When discussing the challenges faced by teachers, Hall referred to those children ‘whose attendance is so irregular as to do them but little good’.⁹³ Hall lamented the impact of infrequent attendance upon the schools’ effectiveness, commenting: ‘Whether it be reading, writing, sewing, tailoring, or shoemaking, the lesson is only half learnt’.⁹⁴ Just as Gardner has found in the context of working-class private schools, many ragged schools experienced seasonal attendance: classrooms were filled in the cold winter months, and left

⁸⁸ ‘Plans and Progress: Hints to Parties Thinking about Establishing Industrial Schools for the Outcast and Destitute’, *RSUM* (July 1849), 128.

⁸⁹ *The Third Annual Report of the Ragged School Union, Established for the Support of Free Schools for the Destitute Poor of London and its Suburbs* (London: Ragged School Union, 1847), 6.

⁹⁰ Hall, *Sought and Saved*, vii, 56.

⁹¹ ‘Teachers’ Column: How to Win a Child’s Heart’, *RSUM* (February 1865), 43.

⁹² Following the 1857 Industrial Schools Act, ‘criminal’ children could be committed by the order of a magistrate to attend an industrial school. As some ragged schools also qualified as industrial schools they often received such children. Nevertheless, the focus of ragged school pedagogical advice centred on those scholars attending voluntarily.

⁹³ Hall, *Sought and Saved*, 27.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 39.

barren on long, summer evenings.⁹⁵ This issue was addressed at a meeting of teachers related in the 'Teachers' Column' in June 1856. According to the article, it 'was admitted by all' that attendance over the summer 'was very fluctuating'. Because of poor attendance, 'teachers felt discouraged' and this was a contributory factor as many left the role after growing disillusioned with the ragged school movement.⁹⁶

Ware's journals provide a tangible account of the discouragement an empty classroom could cause. Ware reflected upon the possible reasons for mass absences, regularly speculating on the impact the weather had had on the turnout of scholars. On 11 July 1852 he noted 'School rather empty probably from the heat of the weather'.⁹⁷ At the close of the same month the school was 'rather empty' again, this time 'in consequence of heavy storms – The rain comes through the roof terribly'.⁹⁸ Ware's journals demonstrate that absent scholars were not only a problem during the summer. Four months after noting the 'heat of the weather', Ware recorded 'Thin school for what reason I know not unless it was the rain'.⁹⁹ The weather was not to blame on 26 December, however, as Ware concluded that the poor attendance was 'probably because of Xmas festivities'.¹⁰⁰ The significance Ware attached to the number of children present – not to mention his note-keeping on the matter – is evident in his entry on 10 April 1853: 'Very thin school – the thinnest since Sept 1849. Alas! I fear without more exertion the school will go down more & more'.¹⁰¹ It was in this context that Hall wrote that each school succeeded or failed according to its ability to attract scholars.

⁹⁵ Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools*, 174.

⁹⁶ 'The Teachers' Column: Delegates' Meeting', *RSUM* (June 1856), 122.

⁹⁷ SHC 1585/2, 11 July 1852.

⁹⁸ SHC 1585/2, 25 July 1852.

⁹⁹ SHC 1585/2, 21 November 1852.

¹⁰⁰ SHC 1585/2, 26 December 1852.

¹⁰¹ SHC 1585/2, 10 April 1853.

The fact that many children came to school ‘to have a lark’ suggests that peer relationships had an important influence on school attendance.¹⁰² Although Mayhew’s *Morning Chronicle* articles, written in opposition to the movement, stressed the dangers of children being morally contaminated by delinquent or criminal classmates, the LRSU downplayed this risk. Instead, ragged school documents focused on the benefits to be reaped from establishing friendships and communities. Rather than preventing the children from interacting with one another, they aimed to create schools where positive and lasting relationships would be formed. The LRSU acknowledged that friendships were a vital component of the appeal; Christmas meals, entertainment evenings, days out, and school reunions sought to knit school communities together and establish bonds both amongst scholars, and between scholars and teachers. Although attendance for the sole purpose of socialising was discouraged, the LRSU nevertheless sought to utilise the children’s love of play and create attractive environments. Organised trips to fairs and parks provided spaces in which the children could play together; thus, on Good Friday in 1857 Ware rewarded five scholars with a visit to the Crystal Palace. Tellingly, he noted afterwards that they ‘seemed to enjoy playing about in the Park more than the interior of the Palace’.¹⁰³ Such accounts demonstrate that teachers recognised the significant role played by peer relationships in forming welcoming communities. Moreover, ragged school literature informed teachers that children learned more readily when lessons involved ‘seeing, hearing, handling, or experimenting’.¹⁰⁴ Thus, school trips were likewise valued as an opportunity to engage the children’s senses. Both ‘the countryside’ and Regent Park’s Zoological Gardens were common destinations for London’s ragged school children. On 15 July 1851 Ware took 40 boys to the Zoological Gardens. He later expressed his frustrations in his journal, writing ‘We had some trouble in managing them. I do not much like it, as they get in other people’s way’.¹⁰⁵ Despite

¹⁰² Caroline Cornwallis, *The Philosophy of Ragged Schools* (London: Pickering, 1851), 52.

¹⁰³ SHC 1585/5, 10 April 1857.

¹⁰⁴ ‘The Teachers’ Column: Attention; or, Principles Rather Than Rules’, *RSUM* (June 1864), 141.

¹⁰⁵ SHC 1585/1, 15 July 1851.

Ware's embarrassment at the children's behaviour, such visits remained a regular feature of the school itinerary.

With regard to educational practice, teachers were advised against subjecting children to long addresses and sermons. Although moralistic and religious addresses were a key part of a ragged school education, it was seen as critical that they were done in such a way that would have a positive impact on the intended audience. When detailing the most important principles to be adhered to within the ragged school classroom, Hall recommended that teachers 'scrupulously avoid anything like an overtaxing of their small powers of endurance and attention'.¹⁰⁶ Recognising children's distinct intellectual needs, Hall critiqued systems according to which scholars were 'shut up – we might almost say, imprisoned' or 'kept in a most unchildlike quietness for three or four hours together'.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in an 1849 article entitled 'Practical Suggestions', the *RSUM* stressed the importance of sermons being delivered 'by some one capable of addressing and interesting children'. The same article specified with particular emphasis that addresses 'should not last above ten or fifteen minutes'.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps after reading the *RSUM*'s 'Practical Suggestions', Ware identified long addresses as a problem in his own school. He certainly learned the importance of speaking concisely in his early as superintendent; in February 1850 he noted that the day had been challenging not only because of 'a lack of teachers', but also because he 'had kept them rather too long' during the address.¹⁰⁹ This extract demonstrates Ware's critical reflection on his teaching practice and shows that he sought to tailor his lessons to the children's capacities. In later entries he critiqued the overly-long addresses of his colleagues. In May 1858, after taking his class to an assembly at a neighbouring school, Ware testified that it 'lasted 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ [hours]' which he judged 'too long'.¹¹⁰ When the teachers gathered to

¹⁰⁶ Hall, *Sought and Saved*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ 'Plans and Progress – Practical Suggestions: The Work, and How to Do it', *RSUM* (February 1849) [*sic*], 33.

¹⁰⁹ SHC 1585/1, 17 February 1850.

¹¹⁰ SHC 1585/5, 3 May 1858.

‘discuss the management of the school’ in October 1864, it was decided that the address should not exceed fifteen minutes.¹¹¹

The manner in which children were addressed was considered to be equally important. Teachers were to utilise topics that interested their scholars to engage them in the subject in hand. Hall advised that ‘experience and study’ would help the teacher ‘to find that aspect of every subject which is most to the taste, and most within the comprehension of their infant minds’.¹¹² The ability to engage children in topics they might otherwise find uninteresting was an enviable gift among teachers. Ragged school publications made it clear that the most successful speakers were those who used terminology that their audience understood. In 1868 the Teachers’ Column advised its readers that their words should suit the ‘mental capacities’ of children.¹¹³ Given the centrality of the Gospel to the ragged school mission, it was critical that children understood the phrases used when praying or singing. Shaftesbury evidently applied such ideals to himself, as *Punch* detailed how, during an assembly for ragged school children, ‘Lord Shaftesbury, as is his wont, addressed the boys in words of kindness and affection’, exhorting them with ‘plain, impressive speech’.¹¹⁴

The way in which children received or responded to addresses was the primary factor under consideration when determining effectiveness. Accordingly, Ware was keenly perceptive to the children’s responses to his own talks. On 7 July 1850 he wrote that the scholars were ‘not very attentive’; while three weeks later they were ‘very attentive to [the] address’, the subject of which he added in brackets as ‘(Jonah)’.¹¹⁵ He reflected on the success of lessons in his journal, noting on 30 June 1850 that he had read the class a story ‘as an experiment’. He deemed the venture a

¹¹¹ SHC 1585/7, October 1864.

¹¹² Hall, *Sought and Saved*, 49.

¹¹³ ‘The Teachers’ Column: Prayer in Ragged Schools’, *RSUM* (January 1868), 19.

¹¹⁴ ‘The Shoeblack Brigade’, *Punch*, 21 February 1857, 80.

¹¹⁵ SHC 1585/1, 7 July 1850, SHC 1585/1, 21 July 1850.

success, concluding that ‘they seemed attentive & interested’.¹¹⁶ Twelve years later, in November 1862, Ware’s journal again conveys his perceptiveness of the mood in the classroom. In a succinct line, Ware recorded his decision ‘not [to] give any address fearing a disturbance’.¹¹⁷ This entry highlights that Ware responded to the children’s behaviour and the atmosphere in the classroom; scholars influenced his plans, causing them to be postponed or cancelled altogether.

Conclusion

Prior to the increasing state intervention that followed the 1870 Education Act, ragged schools played an integral role in Victorian Britain. In London, and across the nation, ragged schools went a considerable way to bridge the gaps in the existing education systems, providing a place for those children whose appearance or want excluded them from other institutions. The interdenominational appeal of the schools brought together evangelicals from across Protestant denominations, generating a formidable response to child poverty. Middle-class individuals such as Ware lived out their social calling within ragged school classrooms in evenings and over weekends, encountering children whose experiences were starkly different from their own. Ware’s Compton Place journals testify to the challenges he faced, highlighting the demanding nature of the role and the commitment – both emotionally and financially – that he made to the school. His detailed and reflective entries provide a hitherto unseen insight into the anxieties ragged school teachers experienced. The tension between Ware’s religious motivations – his desire to share the Gospel with impoverished children – and the reality he faced in the classroom is never far from his entries. Further, the LRSU literature intended for teachers suggests that, when Ware worried about his scholars’ poor attendance, their unmanageable behaviour, or their eternal souls, he was not alone.

¹¹⁶ SHC 1585/1, 30 June 1850.

¹¹⁷ SHC 1585/6, 2 November 1862.

In contrast with the well-known Victorian idiom, children were both seen and heard in the ragged school classroom. Street culture, whether manifested in songs, theatrics, or disruptive shouts, entered the schools with the children. In many cases children appear to have spoken freely and with confidence in their classrooms, with anecdotal reports testifying to the children's quick wit. Such disturbances were not only employed to entertain peers, but to undermine teachers. In belting out street-songs in the place of hymns, children acted in unison, playfully excluding their teacher from the fun. Further, children did not uniformly accept the religious teaching imparted. Ragged school accounts show that children asked questions, challenged their teachers, and made light of the evangelical Christian message on offer. In focusing on classroom dynamics and ragged school teaching advice, the complexity of the scholar-teacher relationship is demonstrated. This article has called into question the notion that the classroom was the teacher's dominion and that the children were victims of evangelical fervour. Ragged school children were by no means passive; they sought out the food, fun, and friends these institutions offered.

Ragged school literature did not conceal the belittlement that teachers endured, which is also documented by local schools. On the contrary, the *RSUM* drew on such reports to convey the passion of their teachers and obtain the sympathy and support of its readers. Moreover, both ragged school literature and local accounts suggest that teachers could be vulnerable within their classrooms. Their intention may have been to share the gospel, but from flying objects – mud, vegetables, and stones – to physical aggression, teachers had to be prepared for conflict. Ragged school accounts demonstrate that the respect of children was hard won and highly valued; the scholars' trust was earned through the teacher's kindness and patience. This aspect of the schools jars with the social control narratives that have dominated historical accounts of the movement. The interaction between ragged school children and their teachers – both advised and in practice – facilitates a more nuanced interpretation of the nature and significance of the

movement as a whole. The voluntary nature of attendance shaped the advice given to ragged school teachers. It was because of the children's freedom that a premium was placed upon the scholars' enjoyment. Teachers were advised to take advantage of the fact that children came 'for a lark', and peer relationships were interpreted as an asset, rather than a danger. Day-trips and events were used to promote friendships and enrich communities. Furthermore, lessons and addresses were evaluated on the basis of the children's responses. Dreary teaching, long sermons, and incomprehensible terminology were the nemesis of the ragged school teacher. The happiness of scholars was the ultimate marker of success in the classroom, effectively positioning the children as consumers the schools sought to please.

Despite the ragged school movement's pertinence to church historians, the ragged schools have received limited attention. Although this article has gone some way to redress this oversight, the movement remains a fertile area of research. With their pan-evangelical appeal, the ragged schools have the potential to generate important insights into interdenominational philanthropy and its impact on cross-class relationships. Scholars' understanding of the role played by Victorian evangelicals – and by their emphasis on familiarity with the Bible – in championing education for the impoverished and improving literacy remains partial. Finally, both the portrayal of Roman Catholic children and their experiences of the institutions warrant attention, and may shed light on the emerging debates surrounding juvenile rights and the sanctity of the family unit.